

CO600 Smallholding Poultry Research

Coombe-Tennant residence transcript

29-09-2018

- All: [After general introductions and polite exchanges, the poultry related questions begin]
- Damon: Why do you own chickens?
- Sue: We've had chickens for as long as I can remember, they're simple and very pleasant animals that can provide much joy for us. Of course we get eggs from them - but it's nice to know where those eggs come from. You know what I mean? It's definitely more expensive and we're not out to earn big bucks or the like but more just for the family benefit, it's great for the grandchildren too as it makes the farm feel much more like a farm even though we're more focused in the horsey side than agricultural side.
- Joanna: Yeah there is something quite simple about chickens, haha. So, you've owned chickens before?
- Sue: Oh yes, we used to have a lot more and we'd let the broody hens hatch more chicks - which is a nightmare in itself as half of them are bloody cockerels and they fight like mad, haha. Our furry friend Mr Fox was and is still the biggest issue, if you forget at any point about them he sweeps in day or night and will happily clean out your stock. It's awful, they leave the carcass and only take one hen but it's like a blood bath. We've downsized massively in the years and found that the 4 hens work brilliantly, getting rid of cockerels has stopped any more broody hens and made them much easier to maintain. It's a shame, we'd love to have them all roam around the yard like they used too but they'll wonder off to somewhere and something will happen to them. It's safer and better.
- Joanna: Oh, that's really sad, I saw that they have a huge amount of space - so they must be happy and safe at least.
- Damon: You mentioned having problems with foxes, do you have any other problems like this?
- Sue: Like foxes? Other than dogs not really, but they know not to attack the hens and often are trying to find rats - you know

how Jack Russells can be, fantastic ratters! We have to shut the chickens up and keep them within a pen that limits them to a uh - certain area; they wander off otherwise.

Damon: How do you 'shut them up'? Do you protect them any other way?

Sue: On the actual house, hutch thing for the hens, there is a sliding door that we let down. We used to have a door on hinges, but it rusted away and was just absolutely rubbish, the wood kept warping and wouldn't shut properly. Now it slides down and we pull it up and tie it up so it holds up in the morning. We don't really do much to protect them other than having a electric fence and making sure they're shut in at night. Some people might shoot foxes but it's more hassle than it's worth for us.

Damon: Ah we've seen that with Sally's home as well, they use a similar system although the chickens are in a enclosed run. What sort of routine do you take with the chickens?

Sue: Well normally they're let out as one of the first things in the morning, we usually feed them a couple hours later as they'll spend the morning scrounging around the pen. Depending on the time of year the hens will go in on their own. Otherwise we just have to wait, normally by around 6 or 7PM; then we shut them up and collect any eggs they've laid.

Joanna: What do you do if you plan to go on holiday?

Sue: Well, that's the problem really - we can't without someone being here. We have in the past paid to have them in 'boarding' houses, but it's been absolutely disastrous. One of our hens came back with half of her feathers falling out and little to no explanation other than - it's natural. This was when our son was at University studying Engineering and we went to Spain for two weeks. The hens are a 24/7 job, these days we try to get David to look after them if we go away for any time.

Damon: Who's David if you don't mind us asking?

Sue: He's our son, he graduated a couple years ago and works in Brighton but normally can look after them hens within his work life.

Joanna: Ah okay, but it is difficult going away? Or on holiday?

Sue: For the most part, it's still a big part of our lives. We can't leave them alone otherwise we'll come home one day, and they'll all be gone.

Joanna: On that note, have you ever forgotten about them? Like forgot to shut them up or...?

Sue: Oh definitely. Many times. Most times we've been fortunate and missed Mr Fox appearing but on occasions he's cleaned us out and we're back to square one. About a year ago we lost 4 of our hens as we forgot to shut them up. Arthur, my husband - had to go to London for surgery overnight and I was visiting him, it was late, and we just forgot with all the drama of what was happening. My son was at University, so he didn't even notice. It was just the last thing we wanted to deal with.

Joanna: Is he okay now though? I'm sorry to hear about that.

Sue: Oh, much better, it wasn't anything too serious - he has some knee problems as he used to be a carpenter but with old age comes old pain, haha.

Joanna: That's good to hear. So, do you mind if we have a look at your chickens?

Damon: Would it be okay if we could take photographs of the run as well?

Sue: Of course, you can, it's outside on the green over there. Shall we go now or would you like anything to drink or some biscuits?

Damon: Well I could go for a cup of tea, but I think if we look at the chickens first and then discuss any more details over tea that would be better.

All: [Walking outside to chicken run]

Sue: So, as you can see this little hutch is where the girls live, they don't need a lot of space and we collect the eggs from in here. Sorry about the smell, we try to keep them clean but they're messy birds. As you can see, they've got plenty of space to keep them occupied and this is the electric fence unit we have to keep them in and out. Was there anything you wanted to see?

Damon: Can you show us how the hutch is opened and closed? How do you feed them or give them water?

Sue: This door slides up and down and we keep it attached with this hook, every night when they've gone to bed we shut them up and let it slide down, and in the morning, we open it up. The food is kept in a bin over in the feed shed along with the horse feed, the rats try to eat it, so we have to lock it

away in the feed bins. The water is in a garden can that we refill and put into a small trough. They're very simple to look after and maintain.

Damon: That's great, so this electric fence protects them?

Sue: Yes, we do have to change the battery from time to time but otherwise we've found it to be the best solution. I don't like to cage them up in small runs as it's not nice and it's nice to see them run about and scratch around.

Damon: Okay. Just a few more questions about general farm and poultry capabilities. What is your mobile signal like out here? Are you able to get a wireless connection on your phone to the internet?

Sue: The phone signal is fine, generally no problems but I'm not sure about the internet as David does most of that. You can have a look if you like.

Damon: If you wouldn't mind, we can do it here - it's pretty simple to check. Joanna can you get your phone out and check it?

Joanna: Yeah, no worries, let me check. Is it called "BT-Wifi WN3U"?

Sue: Yes, do you need the password as it's on the back of the phonebox?

Joanna: No, it's okay. Just want to test signal strength. Is this an old house? The signal is weak but not unusable.

Sue: It's not terribly old, haha. Parts have been rebuilt over the time, such as there - we've had subsidence before which caused issues.

Joanna: Ah it might be the thickness of the walls then. It's not a problem. The signal strength is reliable on Giffgaff, who are you with Damon?

Damon: Tesco but both of us are on O2's network so it should be the same.

Joanna: Ah okay. I think we are mostly done here though. Thank you for letting us talk to you and see your chickens. They're really nice!

Sue: Not at all, I hope you both do well on your project. If you need to come back or take anymore pictures, let Sally know and we will arrange something.

